MEDIA LITERACY AND THE IMPACT ON YOUTH BODY IMAGE

By

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ABSTRACT

Marketing strategies are increasingly integrated with social technologies that have emerged in the last decade. Marketing materials are now delivered through traditional methods (i.e., radio, print, and television) but also through social platforms and devices. Young people have always been exposed to marketing images and advertisements, but now with young people using mobile technology on a daily basis, advertising is pointed directly to them for digestion and internalization. Historically and in the present, young women have struggled with body image and self-worth, struggles which can manifest as mental health issues. This paper will examine the integration of media literacy curriculum into K-12 education, and ask if this could help mitigate these negative effects experienced by young women.
**Introduction**

As social technology advances, online marketing outlets have fully embraced the opportunity to spread their message to mass public audiences. Social technologies are widely accepted amongst youth (for the purposes of this essay defined as those under 18 years of age). Youth are able to access this messaging through Internet and smartphone usage, often on demand and in a private setting. Some literature has identified a negative correlation between interaction with online advertising and body image and self-confidence (MediaSmarts, 2012b). With the ever-increasing demand for social technology these problems are not about to disappear.

MediaSmarts is “a Canadian not-for profit charitable organization” which since 1996 has been developing resources to promote “digital and media literacy” (MediaSmarts, 2012a). Media literacy is the ability to analyze and process media messaging (MediaSmarts, 2012b). Programs teaching media literacy to youth are important aspects of contemporary education (MediaSmarts, 2012b). Integrating media literacy into the primary and secondary school curriculum could help rectify the negative impact young women experience as they digest “ideals or norms” presented through marketing and social images. Using media literacy as a tool could assist young women to build the mental tools needed to combat some of the messaging being directed at them.

Social norms, education, and technology play an integral role in modern marketing. There is significant evidence that media education can counter unrealistic media representations of men and women’s bodies (MediaSmarts, 2012b). Without a higher level of media literacy, youth will still be exposed to these messages, and will not
understand that they are not a societal norm, that they are indeed just a marketing piece to sell a product or service.

This is particularly true for young women. Media messages are so powerful and widespread in our culture that they affect girls long before they are exposed to fashion or beauty ads or magazines (Harriger, Calogero, Witherington, & Smith, 2010). The following paper will explore the current problem surrounding low body image facing young women today, the impact social technology marketing has on youth, and whether media literacy could help mitigate the effects of these issues.

**Research Question**

*Can educational programs about media literacy surrounding new media marketing, delivered through the K-12 educational system mitigate the negative effects on body image in young women in Canada?*

**Interdisciplinary Approach**

An interdisciplinary approach is appropriate when the research has a level of complexity that requires a multi-faceted approach involving a variety of disciplines (Repko, 2011). The impact of media literacy on social technology marketing is the focus of this paper. The scope of the topic draws in a variety of disciplines. Education, cultural norms and technology among others are implied by the research question. This complexity means that an interdisciplinary approach is the best way to gain a greater understanding of the impact media literacy could have on young women. As Repko (2011) states, “interdisciplinary work does not privilege any particular method or theory” (p. 20). I believe gathering a variety of insights allows a broad view of the problem and a
variety of outcomes that are void of any bias inherent in a single discipline. The interdisciplinary approach will allow the research question to be examined from a variety of angles therefore informing the outcome in a robust manner. As Klein (2005) identifies the interdisciplinary approach allow researchers “the ability to create an integrative framework and a more holistic understanding” (p. 10). An integrative framework is necessary for the research question, as this approach will allow the unification of separate disciplines.

**Background**

Outlining the historical trajectory of body image issues, social technologies, and media literacy are the first steps in setting the stage for the current state of each component in relation to the research question at hand. The geographic area of focus for this essay is Canada however, it would be remiss to exclude valuable data gathered from other countries as this information can aid in understanding the issue in a broader sense and suggest approaches that could be used in Canada.

**Body Image**

Body dissatisfaction among young women is a topic that has been researched at length and continues to evolve. In North America, physical image is often a topic of everyday discussion, and how one looks is often rated as quite important (Brennan, Lalonde & Bain, 2010). Body image dissatisfaction has become regarded as a normative experience that young women encounter as they age (Moulding, 2007) creating a cyclical cycle of displeasure from one generation to the next. As Brennan et al (2010) state,
“appearance ideals are often unattainable for the average person, and may be becoming more difficult to meet as the population is becoming heavier” (p. 130).

Historically there has not been much of a focus on health promotion programs to mitigate the problem (Moulding, 2007). Moulding states, “research demonstrates that body image dissatisfaction and associated eating problems reduce the quality of many women’s lives sufficiently to warrant prevention programs” (p. 58). These prevention programs are warranted due to the ideal of a thin female body that is portrayed in western advertising (D’Alessandro & Chitty, 2011) and has become the new normal for North America. As D’Alessandro & Chitty (2011) state, “idealized media stereotypes closely reflect the cultural definition of attractiveness” (p. 846). If the cultural definition of attractiveness is to be very thin and beautiful this image and understanding will be inherited by female youth and create mental and physical health issues trying to achieve an unobtainable standard.

Body image dissatisfaction can lead to greater health problems if not addressed. For example as Moulding (2007) states, “an Australian study suggests that up to 56 percent of women are dissatisfied with their bodies (Tiggeman & Pennington, 1990), while one-third of Australian women are reported to have used binge dieting, vomiting and diet pills to reduce their weight, which are known precursors to the development of anorexia and bulimia (Wade et al., 1996)” (p. 58). These statistics relate to the United States; where eating disorders such as anorexia and bulimia may affect up to 20 percent of female adolescents (Rabak-Wagner, Eichoff-Shemek, & Kelly-Vance, 1998). Another way female youth cope with body issues is to limit caloric intake or obsess over food products known as disordered eating (Brennan et al, 2010). According to the Canadian
Mental Health Association (2016), 70% percent of women and 35% of men are dieting. If we extrapolate this data and overlay it on the youth population, clearly the number of young women struggling with body image issues is likely higher than their male counterparts.

There are two main causes of body dissatisfaction among youth: sources of comparison come from the media (MediaSmarts, 2012b) and society accepting the media portrayal as “normal”. These factors need to be taken into account when building out a media literacy program.

**Social Technologies**

Technological development has been accelerating rapidly in the past decade. Social technologies in particular are now everywhere, particularly among young people. In the past few decades, one of the major changes in society has been the adoption of information and communications technologies by a large percentage of youth in Western countries (Mensch, 2012), most notably, social technologies.

Skaržauskienė, Tamošiūnaitė and Žalėnienė (2013) define social technologies as “any technologies used for goals of socium or with any social basis” (p. 2). Essentially these technologies were created for the purpose of interaction or sharing in the modern age. As Chui et al (2012) state, “social technologies tap into the most basic human traditions: forming groups and sharing information, enjoying entertainment, and communicating interesting content (p. 17). Platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Tumblr, and any other social interaction sites or platforms are considered
social technologies and these social technologies are accessed on Internet-based websites through a desktop or mobile device (Chui et al, 2012).

Mesch (2012) states “the Internet and cell phones are agents of social change because they facilitate the rapid diffusion of information, the creation and maintenance of social networks, and the acceleration of the process of autonomy from parents (p. 97)”. Social networks and technologies are being used extensively by the adolescent demographic. Mesch (2012) says “in the United States 79% of youth had sent messages via social media sites and 44% had sent emails; similarly in Europe 59% were using social media sites and 62% of youth were using instant messaging” (p. 98). Social technologies have disrupted and almost taken over the Internet in a sense (Chui et al, 2012). In addition, these technologies’ have evolved with a sub-set of youth growing up in a time where social technologies and interactions are the norm. Biocca’s (2000) says “that members of the Internet generation may spend up to twenty years of their lives in front of, interacting with, and connected to this medium” (p. 22). Biocca (2000) explains that the high level of exposure to new media brings about a sense of the unknown. “[I]f the young brain and body are increasingly connected to media information, the most important long-term changes might be cognitive (p. 22)”.

With the majority of youth using social technology on a daily basis, it is important to note new trends; for example, the expectation of media integration in the workforce (Chui et al, 2012) and the risk of damage to interpretation or interpersonal interactions.

The study by Skaržauskienë, Tamošíūnaitė and Žalėnienë (2012) found that: [S]ocial networking capabilities are providing vital information in a way that is adaptive and user-driven. However, all these technologies have limitations that
can easily lead to misinterpretation, as with the lack of nonverbal communication, they are not capable of providing the same quality of communication as eye-to-eye interaction (p. 8).

I believe these risks are important to identify, as the digital age is showing no signs of slowing down. As these technology platforms are accepted into normal usage in and out of the workplace it is necessary to be aware of the benefits and disadvantages of these technologies to ensure usage is being managed properly.

Media Literacy

As outlined above the Internet and technology have become embedded in day-to-day life. Furthermore these channels of communication have become mainstream for sharing information and marketing messages promoted and developed by various types of organizations. Media literacy can be defined as programming or literature that evokes critical thinking skills or methods to identify what media messaging is trying to convey (Ciurel, 2012). Media literacy as it concerns social technology, is a fairly new field of study and interest (Livingstone, 2004) as new media marketing is itself a fairly new field. Media literacy in the past was primarily concerned with newspaper print advertisements or television commercials. However, the field and scope of media literacy has broadened to encompass new media. Social technology platforms allow for media messaging to be delivered one-on-one through a device to a person. Sometimes these messages or images are based on search history, demographics, or age (MediaSmarts, 2012b). Social platforms have also employed “models” who pose as actual consumers to display a brand, physical appearance, or location (Wagner, Aguirre & Sumner, 2016); youth who do not
understand the difference might believe these models represent reality and thus create a false sense of identity or a longing for something that is actually staged.

With these new advancements in marketing, media literacy must address these issues. According to MediaSmarts (2012b), “to be effective, media literacy interventions need to be long-term; focus on critical thinking, questioning and discussion; invite active involvement through activities, rather than direct instruction; and teach key concepts of media literacy” (Para...2). This approach seems natural to integrate into the school curriculum and support the conversation at home but currently not a standard offering in North America (MediaSmarts, 2012b). Media literacy programming is important especially for youth today as social technology is widely accepted, beginning with children from a young age (Ciurel, 2012) and without proper media literacy programming being available to youth, the negative side effects of marketing could become exponentially worse.

Among the various programs designed to teach media literacy, there are some common base of principals: first, developing the ability to recognize what a message is and who the target is (Ciurel, 2012); second developing an understanding of the social and ideological implications on the user such as body image (MediaSmarts, 2012b); third, teaching critical thinking skills in relation to various new media platforms (Ciurel, 2012); and finally, articulating that not all marketing and online communications foster negativity (Ciurel, 2012). These components are gathered from various sources but all contribute to the creation of a successful media literacy curriculum. I believe media literacy is a field that has the ability to be as powerful and informative as educational programs surrounding racism or sexuality.
Delivery Frameworks

The implementation of a media literacy program can take many formats. To gain a full understanding of media literacy, approaches in and out of classroom programs will be examined. Draper et al’s (2015) research study “Educational Intervention/Case Study: Implementing an Elementary-Level, Classroom-Based Media Literacy Education Program for Academically At-Risk Middle-School Students in the Non-Classroom Setting” used media literacy education to help mitigate the risk of substance abuse. The program comprised of 10 modules focusing on empowerment. Fact-finding was carried out at an after-school care program in a low socio-economic area of Missouri, United States (Draper et al, 2015). After school care workers administered the training as this program was delivered out of school (Draper et al, 2015). To measure the success of the program a pre/post media questionnaire developed by the National Registry of Evidence-based Program and Practices was used with all participants (Draper et al, 2015).

Draper et al (2015) found:

… overall, participants significantly increased their preferences for non-alcohol-related advertisements, significantly increased their ability to identify techniques advertisers use as well improved their media deconstruction skills, significantly increased their negative opinions about drinking and smoking behaviors, and significantly decreased their positive perceptions of cigarette and alcohol content in advertising (p. 19)

Wade, Davidson, and O’Dea’s (2003) research study “A Preliminary Controlled Evaluation of a School Based Media Literacy Program and Self-Esteem Program for Reducing Eating Disorder Risk Factors” is highly aligned with this paper’s research
question. Their research study was carried out in Australia, with 86 grade 8 students (53 boys and 33 girls); the curriculum was delivered in 5 sessions (replacing Religion class) each running 50 minutes (Wade, Davidson, & O’Dea, 2003). The sessions were interactive, exploratory, and promoted participation. Results were measured by way of three questionnaires delivered pre, midway, and 3-months post (Wade, Davidson, & O’Dea, 2003).

Overall Wade, Davidson, & O’Dea (2003) concluded: “that delivery of a media literacy program within an interactive, student centered, self-esteem building framework may potentially be a safe and effective way of reducing risk factors for eating disorders” (p. 381). It is my belief that the data in this research study was slightly skewed by the imbalance of genders represented. At the baseline it was revealed that the girls had higher concerns with weight, body shape, and dietary constraints (Wade, Davidson, & O’Dea, 2003). However a significantly higher male population could have skewed the overall outcomes.

These two case studies outline two viable approaches for delivering media literacy programs to youth. These frameworks are transferable and easy to amend to meet the needs of different segments of the population. I believe that a blend of these approaches would be well suited to combat overall body image issues in girls.

**Discussion**

These two examples show that students who participate in media literacy education studies are more adept at recognizing the underlying message being delivered or the purpose of the message. Furthermore, students are able to identify overarching
themes such as comparison pitfalls, and critical thinking (Wade, Davidson, & O’Dea, 2003). However, these themes do not specifically address the impact media literacy could have on body image perceptions young females’ experience. For the purposes of the analysis being developed in this paper, it is important to note that young men can and are impacted by media messaging. It is not exclusive to females. Children as young as three identify the difference between fat and thin and can draw negative correlations to the “fat” person (Harriger, Calogero, Witherington, & Smith, 2010). However, as Brennan et al (2010) state, “the literature continues to demonstrate that women suffer from higher rates of discontentment with their bodies and that this discontentment negatively impacts their lives” (p. 131).

Media plays a role in this dissatisfaction as what is displayed in marketing of any sort is often the new normal or acceptable way to look or act. These images of thin or beauty defined become the baseline of acceptance in Western society these definitions are highly embedded and could cause negative long term sociological affects (D’Alessandro & Chitty, 2011). Social technology is the vehicle these messages are being delivered for the most part. The research has clearly displayed that young people rely heavily on their mobile devices and social media platforms. Young people also rely on mobile technology to communicate with their peers (Mesch, 2012).

Brennan et al (2010) clearly articulate the impact by stating:

… according to sociocultural theory, the more often an individual is exposed to mass media containing idealistic representations of the body, the less favorable an individual’s body image evaluations will become. The sociocultural theory purports that mass media influences an individual’s perceptions of what the ideal
body is, and bodies that do not match this ideal are therefore thought to be unattractive (p. 130).

These findings clearly set the stage for the need and implementation of media literacy programming in Canada. Furthermore, I believe that media literacy curriculum and programming need to be progressive and inclusive of social technologies as youth respond positively to these methods.

**Recommendations**

The literature demonstrates various topics and different approaches to media literacy delivery. However, the manner in which integration is conducted continues to seem vague, as most media literacy programs have only been piloted in schools, and not been integrated into the regular curriculum. MediaSmarts created a comprehensive “Digital Literacy Framework for Canadian Schools” in 2016. This framework covers all aspects of digital and media literacy categories and includes lesson plans, worksheets, online games, online learning tools, and tips for delivery. The framework offers segmented lessons based on grade level, building up to a greater understanding in high school (MediaSmarts, 2012b). The framework offers six categories: Ethics and Empathy, Privacy and Security, Community Engagement, Digital Health, Consumer Awareness, Finding and Verifying, and Making and Remixing (MediaSmarts, 2012b). These categories drive the lessons offered and often overlap based on the topic being covered.

This framework is sophisticated and easy to execute in the classroom setting. The work in preparing the curriculum has been completed, leaving the only question that of delivery. Implementing this framework throughout the educational system in Canada as a
mandatory offering rather than an optional resource teachers could choose to use, could be beneficial. Integration into the K-12 system in Canada would create the exposure necessary to assist in rectifying the issues young girls are experiencing regarding their body or self-worth. The programming is not overly intensive, if it follows the MediaSmarts framework, and I believe would be best suited to be delivered through the language arts class throughout K-12. Language Arts is the study and understanding of literacy tools such as reading, writing, comprehension, and viewing (Roe and Ross, 2005). Media literacy aligns naturally with this.

There is a negative correlation between mass or new media exposure and body image (Brennan et al, 2010). However if new media technologies could be used in the classroom to deliver media literacy awareness and tools new media could play a role in remedying the situation. Embracing new media to assist in the delivery of media literacy programs paired with other online activities that focus on reflection would create a holistic approach to helping young girls understand that their self-worth is not tied to marketing images. The goal of media literacy is not to fight technology but rather give students the tools to embrace media in a healthy manner. La Caze (2017) conducted a project in her junior high classroom to engage the students in a blogging exercise to enhance their literacy skills. While not related to media literacy directly I believe that this approach and willingness to embrace new technology to support learning and sharing is powerful in the realm of media literacy and should be embraced as an aspect of programming. If students had the ability to reflect on their media literacy lessons through an online format it would be supporting their relationship with media and the Internet. As La Caze (2017) states, “for some students, the blogging platform linked to their own
experience of creating texts and sharing media; for other students, it provided them with the knowledge, understanding and skills to inspire them to be publishers of meaningful text in the future” (p. 27). There has to be an aspect of reflection when undertaking media literacy programming to ensure the students understand the “why” behind the lessons. Especially when trying to combat body image issues in girls, monitoring reflections would allow teachers to monitor their progress or open the door for further conversation.

As there are tools and resources that are readily available for implementation in Canada. These resources are not onerous or costly and would offer students the ability to learn about the technologies, advertisements, and platforms they are currently exposed to and will continue to grow up with. Further to this point, Canada is a country with a robust educational system and the integration of the MediaSmarts framework within the K-12 Language Arts program across the country might well put Canada on the map as a leader in media literacy and commitment to students. Such a mandated media literacy programme could alleviate the stress put on young girls in relation to body image worries that manifest into self-harm and mental health issues; research studies display piloted media literacy programs do indeed impact these issues in a positive manner.

**Conclusion**

The research displays a strong argument for the issues related to female youth and their negative perceptions towards their body or personal image. In addition, new media marketing through social technology continues to grow and become more pervasive. Exploring media literacy (education), social technologies (technology), and body image (social) with an interdisciplinary approach allows for a layering and cross-pollination of
information to inform the research question. Overall the research demonstrates a positive correlation between youth receiving media literacy training; therefore I believe that there is value in the continuation of this research in the Canadian context. MediaSmarts (2012b) has presented a comprehensive Canadian focused resource that can be accessed and used free of charge. This resource could offer great value in the Canadian K-12 system with the proper instruction and tracking mechanisms to monitor progress and internalization by female youth. I believe that if media literacy becomes a topic that is talked about and understood amongst youth it could not only support these youth in being body positive but also to shift societal expectations of acceptable body image regardless of marketing efforts.
References


